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Plan calls for 6-lane U.S. 321

Proposal for Caldwell's roads would realign N.C. 18 crossing

By ERICA BESHEARS

LENOIR — A popular route for Charlotte-area residents to head to the mountains would be widened to six lanes, according to the draft of a 25-year plan for Caldwell County roads.

The plan drafted by the N.C. Department of Transportation calls for widening U.S. 321 to six lanes between Hickory and Lenoir and revamping Smith's Crossroads, the congested intersection of U.S. 321 and N.C. 18.

It may take a little while for local officials to embrace the plan's touchier aspects, particularly the widening of U.S. 321 and the changing of Smith's Crossroads, which could claim some local businesses.

"I think we need to keep looking at it," Caldwell County commissioner Larry Taylor said.

The plan for U.S. 321 would only widen it to six lanes. It would not restrict driveway access or eliminate traffic lights. Some local officials worry that simply adding lanes will not solve the road's biggest problem — the dozens of roads, businesses and homes whose driveways empty directly onto the highway.

The state looked at turning U.S. 321 into a restricted-access freeway, like it is between Hickory and Gastonia, said Kurt Freitag, the transportation engineer who worked on the plan. But it would cost too much to buy rights-of-way from all the businesses, build access roads and create interchanges, he said.

"Cost was a big deal on 321," he said. "The time to make roads with no driveways on them is at the beginning."

The cost of building a freeway was estimated at \$323 million. The price tag for simply widening U.S. 321: \$108 million.

But Freitag said other parts of the plan could take pressure off U.S. 321. When Connelly Springs Road is widened to four lanes, it will be a more direct link between Lenoir and Interstate 40 than U.S. 321.

Even more controversial could be the plan for Smith's Crossroads, the biggest bottleneck in Caldwell County. Freitag has proposed an interchange where N.C. 18 would cross over U.S. 321 on a bridge. People traveling on U.S. 321 wouldn't have to stop at a red light, so it would help traffic flow through the area.

Here's the problem: several businesses on the corners of the intersection would have to relocate. Other businesses along the busy strip would lose their access to U.S. 321.

"Their plan would take a lot of businesses," said Ed George, a Lenoir City Council member. "That didn't come across too favorable."

He would prefer sprucing up the intersection to allow better right turns, at least in the short term.

But Freitag said that of all the possible fixes, his proposed interchange would be the least disruptive. And he says doing nothing is not an option — by 2025, the congestion at Smith's Crossroads will be off the chart.

The suggestions in the plan are preliminary and are so far in the future that most have not been funded. Thoroughfare plans are supposed to help local planners address land-use zoning that matches future road construction.

It also helps local officials request road improvements to the DOT. Freitag said he hoped to work with local officials to smooth out differences and get the plan adopted. "DOT's not going to force this plan on anybody," he said. "It's not everything that they would ideally want. I want it to be a realistic plan." "DOT's not going to force this plan on anybody."

Kurt Freitag
Transportation engineer

Local News

DOT supporting traffic flow changes in Lenoir

By PATRICIA TALLENT, News-Topic County Editor

Posted: Thursday, December 07, 2006

LENOIR - N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) officials support Lenoir's decision to change traffic flow in downtown Lenoir and are preparing cost estimates to convert one-way streets back into two-way streets.

"Due to the completion of the Lenoir Southwest Bypass Loop, through traffic needs in Lenoir have been reduced," DOT Division Engineer R.C. McCann said in a letter to Lenoir officials. "Therefore, the Department of Transportation will support the decision of the city to make changes to the traffic flow pattern in uptown Lenoir." McCann said he has asked DOT Division Traffic Engineer Dean Ledbetter to prepare two estimates for changing downtown state system streets back to a two-way traffic pattern. One estimate will be for Main Street only. The other estimate will be for completely eliminating the one-way system on state system streets in Lenoir. The estimates will be for the cost for revisions to the traffic signals. The cost of the proposed work would be paid by the city, Ledbetter said. "The DOT will bear the cost of the pavement markings and the signage required for such a changeover," Ledbetter said.

In the letter, Ledbetter also answered maintenance concerns of Lenoir city officials. Lenoir officials had asked whose responsibility it was to mow on the N.C. 18 Bypass. Ledbetter said the DOT is

responsible for mowing on the bypass. On the cleaning of drainage inlets, Ledbetter said the inlets have been checked and cleaned by the DOT. Ledbetter said the storm drain manhole on Mulberry Street is the city's responsibility. "It is our understanding that the repairs have been completed," he said. Ledbetter said the DOT encourages the "city to clean and sweep all the streets, as they have time. This is a good service to the city, to NCDOT, and the citizens." On proposed improvements, Ledbetter said the DOT is looking at possible changes to the roadway at the intersection of U.S. 321 and N.C. 18 (Smith's Crossroads) to lengthen the right turn lane to eastbound N.C. 18. The DOT also is conducting a traffic signal investigation at the intersection of N.C. 18 at Hibriten Drive.

Local News

DOT plan to widen Hwy. 18 far from finalized

By PATRICIA TALLENT, News-Topic County Editor

Posted: Friday, March 23, 2007

GAMEWELL - The widening of U.S. 64/N.C. 18 to four lanes between Gamewell and Morganton is bound to impact some residences and businesses, but at this point in the process N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) officials have not determined how many or which ones will be affected.

A number of citizens turned out Thursday at Gamewell Middle School to ask questions and comment on the project during a citizens informational workshop. The major question on their minds was the impact on their residences. The widening project currently is scheduled to begin in fiscal year 2008. Stephen Roberts of the DOT Highway Division said the exact location of the road has not been selected. The DOT currently owns 100 feet of right of way along N.C. 18 and a total of 250 to 300 feet of right of way will be needed to widen the road, Roberts said.

"We are really in the preliminary stages," Roberts said. "At this point we are not sure how many houses and businesses would be affected. We won't know until the preliminary engineering is completed, which should be around the time the Environmental Assessment is completed. After we have a proposed location we will hold a public hearing."

The DOT proposal would widen existing U.S. 64/N.C. 18 from two lanes to a four-lane divided highway between Morganton and Gamewell. DOT officials say the project will increase capacity, improve travel between Morganton and Lenoir, and enhance safety. According to the current schedule, the Environmental Assessment should be completed in 2002. The Environmental Assessment looks at concerns such as wetlands and stream impact and the impact on homes and businesses. The final Environmental Document is expected to be completed in March 2003.

Right of way acquisition is scheduled to begin in fiscal year 2006. Construction would then begin in fiscal year 2008 and probably take two years. DOT officials say the schedules "are subject to change depending on the availability of sufficient highway funds."

The project is expected to cost \$31,750,000, which includes \$3.1 million to acquire right of way and \$28.4 million for construction. Approximately 9,400 to 12,200 vehicles per day traveled N.C. 18 in the year 2000. The number of vehicles per day on the road is expected to increase by 2025 to 17,800 to 22,600 vehicles per day.

East side, west side and symmetric widening along with some new locations are being evaluated for the project. The alternatives are:

- Section 1A: East side widening - north of the Catawba River to north of Piedmont Road.
- Section 1B: New location - north of the Catawba River to north of Piedmont Road.
- Section 2: West side widening - north of Piedmont Road to Duckworth Drive. East Side Widening - Duckworth Drive to Hartland Road.
- Section 3: West side widening - Hartland Road to Antioch Road. East side widening - Hartland Road to Antioch Road.
- Section 4: West side widening - Antioch Road to south of Calico Road. East side widening - Antioch Road to south of Calico Road.
- Section 5: West side widening - south of Calico Road to Rocky Road. East side widening - south of Calico Road to Rocky Road. Symmetric widening - south of Calico Road to Rocky Road.

Sections 1A, 1B, 2, 3 and 4 include a four-lane divided highway with a 46-foot median. Section 5 includes a four-lane divided highway with a 20-foot median. Written comments or requests for more information may be sent to Mark L. Reep, P.E., Project Development Engineer; Project

Development and Environmental Analysis Branch; N.C. Department of Transportation, 1548 Mail Service Center; Raleigh, N.C. 27699-1548. E-mail: mreep@dot.state.nc.us.

Local News

DOT plans local road improvements

By PATRICIA TALLENT, News-Topic Staff County Editor

Posted: Monday, May 11, 2007

LENOIR - More than \$3.6 million in paving projects and other secondary road improvements are proposed for Caldwell County by the N.C. Department of Transportation (DOT) during the fiscal year that begins July 1, 2007.

The DOT will hold a public hearing on the proposed road improvements at 7 p.m. Monday in the City/County Chambers of the Caldwell County office building in Lenoir. The total \$3,643,175 allocation consists of \$1,586,366 from the Secondary Road Fund and \$2,056,809 from the Highway Trust Fund.

The DOT proposes to spend \$2.7 or 75.9 percent of the funds to pave rural roads and \$545,000 to pave subdivision and residential roads.

Four rural roads will be paved with \$2.2 million. In priority order the projects are:

- (1) S.R. 1501 - Old Sampson Road, 1.40 mile from S.R. 1504 to Wilkes County line; grade, drain, base and pave; \$740,000.
- (2) S.R. 1350A - Setzer's Gap Road, 1.40 mile from S.R. 1353 to S.R. 1349; grade, drain, base and pave; \$735,000.
- (3) S.R. 1730A - Duck Creek Road, 1 mile from S.R. 1729 to S.R. 1731; grade, drain, base and pave; \$470,000.
- (4) S.R. 1762 - Fox Winkler Road, .87 mile from S.R. 1718 to end of maintenance; grade, drain, base and pave; \$275,000.

The DOT proposes to spend \$545,000 to pave

six subdivision and residential roads. The projects in priority order are:

- (1) S.R. 1556 - Laytown Place, .50 mile from S.R. 1507 to end of maintenance; grade, drain, base and pave; \$190,000.
- (2) S.R. 1388 - Helton Hartley Place, .30 mile from U.S. 64/N.C. 90 to end of maintenance; grade, drain, base and pave; \$95,000.
- (3) S.R. 1529 - Carolina Drive, .20 mile from end of pavement to end of pavement; grade, drain, base and pave; \$30,000.
- (4) S.R. 1843 - Hall Place, .40 mile from S.R. 1740 to end of maintenance; grade, drain, base and pave; \$110,000.
- (5) S.R. 1390 - Bush Place, .27 mile from S.R. 1341 to end of maintenance; grade, drain, base and pave; \$100,000.
- (6) S.R. 1764 - New Farm Road, .10 mile from end of pavement to end of maintenance; grade, drain, base and pave; \$20,000.

The DOT proposes to spend \$240,000 or 18 percent of the funds to improve two paved roads. The projects in priority order are:

- S.R. 1751 - Grace Chapel Road, to widen to 20 feet the pavement for 1.80 miles from the existing 20-foot pavement to S.R. 1107, \$190,000.

- S.R. 1310 - Abington Road, to widen pavement to 22 feet for 1 mile from S.R. 1301 to S.R. 1314, \$50,000.

The DOT also will spend \$253,855 on spot stabilization on 36 roads and \$162,832 on maintenance of paved and unpaved roads. A total of \$221,488 will be placed in reserve for surveys, right of way acquisition, overdrifts, road additions and entrances to fire departments and rescue squads.